DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 900 EC 133 367

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TITLE How Much Do Black Parents with Exceptional Children Really Know About P.L. 94-142 and It's Significance for Them: A Survey.
PUB DATE Feb 81
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at The Council for Exceptional Children Conference on The Exceptional Black Child (New Orleans, LA, February, 1981, Session H-24).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Blacks; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal Legislation; Knowledge Level; *Minority Groups; Parent Attitudes; *Parent School Relationship; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *Education for All Handicapped Children Act

ABSTRACT

Given the expectation of education personnel that parents should be passive participants in the educational planning process and given the historical lack of access to information experienced by many culturally diverse parents, an attempt was made to ascertain the knowledge level of 13 Black parents with handicapped children with regard to specific tenets of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Among findings were that questions receiving the least number of affirmative responses were those dealing with hearings, the individualized education program, free appropriate education, and evaluation; although six parents stated they had been invited to a planning meeting with school personnel, an almost equal number stated they had not been invited; and only six of the 13 parents recalled having signed forms necessary to place their child in special education. Among recommendations drawn from findings were that the educational level of the parents should be known before sending out written communication, that a positive approach be taken beginning with some of the child's positive attributes, and that care be taken to make sure parents have a clear understanding of what is being communicated. (SB)

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ED204900

HOW MUCH DO BLACK PARENTS WITH EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN REALLY KNOW ABOUT PL 94-142 AND IT'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR THEM: A SURVEY

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EC133367

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PUBLIC LAW 94-142

The premise upon which Public Law 94-142 is based is that all children can be educated to some extent. The law views education as a basic right not to be precluded by existent disabilities, but to be predicated on existing abilities. The promise of 94-142 is that all children will be educated to whatever extent possible regardless of handicapping conditions. Public Law 94-142 mandates that each handicapped child will receive a free appropriate education in the least restrictive setting. However, legislative mandate is not, in and of itself, sufficient to guarantee this. Full implementation of any law is dependent on public support and public awareness of its specific directives.

Perhaps the most vital directive made by PL 94-142 in its effort to protect the educational rights of the handicapped, is the requirement that parents of handicapped children be included and actively involved in any decisions or processes which will affect the education of their offspring. However, if parents are to effectively execute the role guaranteed to them by 94-142, they must be equipped with knowledge of the law and of the critical part they play in its successful implementation.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The picture of parental involvement in public education is a dichotomous one. On the one hand, educators and public

schools decry what they perceive as a lack of parental concern with and involvement in the educational process. On the other hand, Robert Shadick in his article "The Myth of the Apathetic Parent" (1970), cites finding what he felt was "considerable evidence that parents are interested in their child's education." "Past contacts with parents," he says, "made me seriously doubt that parents anywhere are apathetic or disinterested in their child's education." Indeed, record indicates that, particularly in the case of the handicapped, it is primarily the efforts of parents which has led to increased educational opportunity for so many children.

Further complicating the picture are what appear to be antithetical attitudes of parents toward the schools. Robert Marion (1977) found that many Black parents view the schools with suspicion and alienation because of the historical mistreatment perpetrated on their children by schools. In his article "Communicating With Parents of Culturally Diverse Exceptional Children," Marion found that parents have concerns relative to school practices in testing, identification, labelling and placement of their children. Conversely, one finds many parents who believe that professionals in education are best qualified to make decisions regarding placement and programs for their children. These parents often seem naively willing to leave matters concerning education programming

for their children solely in the hands of school personnel.

Whatever other reasons one might postulate for such contradictory observations regarding parent attitudes and involvement in education, it is obvious that critical to an understanding of this issue is a close look at the communication which takes place between parents, educators and the schools.

PARENT NEED FOR INFORMATION

Unless parents of the handicapped, as well as professionals, are well informed about the tenets of Public Law 94-142 the promise of a free appropriate education for all handicapped children will remain unfulfilled. The critical question is just how well informed are parents, particularly culturally diverse parents, about their rights and the educational rights of their handicapped children?

Marion has pointed out that historically many parents of culturally diverse children "have not profited from all the established communication vehicles used by non-minority parents." Yet ample documentation exists that historically those children most frequently labelled as mentally or emotionally "handicapped" by public schools have been children from culturally diverse backgrounds. Marion states that "The need for information constitutes one of the primary requests from parents of culturally diverse gifted and handicapped children." Both the Children's Defense Fund, 1975

and the Southern Regional Council, 1974 cite complaints from parents of culturally diverse handicapped children that prior to 94-142 they had no input into the placement of their children, nor were their opinions solicited. It would seem that PL 94-142 should provide a remedy to this problem of lack of information.

EDUCATORS' VIEW OF THE PARENT ROLE IN PL 94-142

Despite attempts of PL 94-142 to assure that parents are actively involved in their handicapped children's education, several studies indicate that reality is still falling far short of legislative intent. Yoshida and his colleagues (1978) reported the responses of planning team members regarding appropriate activities for parents in a planning team meeting. The 24 planning team activities suggested for parents ranged from contributing information to finalizing decisions. However of those team members who did agree that parents should participate for each of the 24 activities during a team meeting, only two of the suggested activities were selected by more than 50% of respondents as being appropriate for parental participation. These two activities were: presenting information relevant to the case and gathering information relevant to the case. Other activities were said to be appropriate for parental participation by less than half of the planning team members. Yoshida reported a low percentage of affirmative responses for such items as reviewing the appropriateness

of the student's educational program, reviewing the student's educational progress, judging programming alternatives and finalizing decisions.

A study conducted by Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull and Curry (1977) looks at the actual role the parents of handicapped children are encouraged to take in the planning process. The researchers developed a coding instrument and observed the IEP conference process in three school districts in North Carolina. Some of the findings of this study were (1) that the "resource teacher talked more than twice as much as the parent." (2) that the "primary recipients of statements made during the conference were parents," (3) that in cases where scheduled conferences were not held because parents failed to attend. educational personnel chose not to proceed with the conference because "the IEP had been written primarily by the resource teacher prior to the conference." Researchers concluded that other team members viewed the purpose of the conference as "informing parents of the nature of the already developed IEP, obtaining suggestions from them for modification and receiving their approval." The study observed, in addition that "the legal rights and responsibilities of parents were glossed over in the majority of conferences." In other words, it appears that all too often educational personnel expect parents to "provide information to the planning team, but they are not

expected to participate actively in making decisions about their child's program." (Yoshida et al, 1978)

Fanning (1977) and Olion (1980) also point out that parents of black children have, for the most, been expected to be passive regarding the education of their children. Obviously these findings do not conform with 94-142's legislative attempts to increase parental participation in educational planning for handicapped children. The findings also lend support to Shadick's assertion that what appears to school personnel as apathy in culturally diverse parents may be "something entirely different."

SURVEY OF RURAL BLACK PARENTS

Given the expectation of education personnel that parents should be passive participants in the educational planning process and given the historical lack of access to information experienced by many culturally diverse parents, an attempt was made to ascertain the knowledge level of some minority parents with handicapped children with regard to specific tenets of Public Law 94-142. Anytown, a small rural community in Arkansas, was chosen as target area for a parent survey on 94-142.

Rural school districts have special problems. The 1979 NRP National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project, in its final report pointed out that:

- 32.2% of students reside in nonmetropolitan areas, compared with 28.8% in central city school districts.
- Services are severely limited in rural areas.

- Frequently no special education or supportive services exist in rural schools.
- Rural schools account for 67% of all districts in the nation.
- Problems related to organization, finance, personnel, supportive and transportation services present vast obstacles to adequate development of special education.
- 40% of all rural residents 'ive in poverty.

These rather depressing findings suggest that perhaps the truest assessment of 94-142's impact will be made among the rural school districts of the country.

The Anytown school district was chosen as target area for the parent survey because it manifests so many of the problems described in the report of the National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project. Anytown is located in a poverty belt, social services in the town are nonexistent and certain specialized school personnel are difficult to recruit and/or retain. The size of Anytown was an additional feature which made it appealing as a survey area. Surveyors felt that the size of the town would increase the feasibility of talking with all the parents of school aged handicapped children. Anytown has a population of approximately 500. Its economic base comes from farming. Most of Anytown's population is Black. Anytown's school enrollment totals 259. Only one of these students is White. Three are Mexican-American. Other white school-aged children in Anytown attend school in a somewhat larger neighboring community or have been placed in a private school in still another nearby community.

Anytown's special education program is entering its fourth year, having been initiated in 1977. Of the 107 elementary pupils, seven receive assistance in a special education resource room. Seventeen of the 152 high school students receive special education services. Approximately 85% of the entire student body are classified as Title I students.

Questions for the survey administered to Anytown parents were developed by the surveyors and distributed for feedback and modification to several education faculty members at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. Survey questions were designed to cover the basic rights afforded to parents under PL 94-142 in the simplest and briefest terms possible. The original survey instrument contained eleven questions about the tenets of 94-142. In order to obtain a more complete picture of the interaction between parents of handicapped children and Anytown school personnel and to assess the opportunities available for the dissemination of information on 94-142, five additional questions were added to the parent questionnaire and several questions were developed to be answered by school administrators.

SURVEY METHOD

When the survey instruments were finalized, an appointment was made to explain the survey and its purpose to the superintendent of the Anytown school district and to enlist his cooperation and assistance in obtaining the names and addresses of parents who had children enrolled in special education classes in

Anytown. In return for the cooperation of Anytown's educational administrators, surveyors agreed to share survey findings with them and to assist them in developing and implementing whatever followup strategies might be indicated by survey results.

The original strategy for contacting parents was to telephone them. Surveyors felt a phone conversation would be less impersonal than a mailed questionnaire which might or might not be read and returned. However, once the list of parent names was obtained it became clear that telephone interviews would not constitute an effective strategy. Many parents had no phone or had numbers which were unlisted. Therefore, the decision was made to visit parents in their homes. This method too had one particularly perplexing aspect. Because of the extremely rural nature of the Anytown area, it was difficult to locate parents' homes. The addresses of most parents consisted only of a route and/or post office box number. However, armed with parent names, numerous survey forms, a bewildering hodgepodge of directions from the local post office and true grit, surveyors began their visits. Through mud, cotton fields and everpresent regiments of family dogs, questions regarding PL 94-142 were carried to 13 of the 16 Anytown parents with children officially classified by the schools as handicapped or as having handicapping conditions which required special education services.

Although two or three parents were at first a little reticent in their welcomes, overall, parents were extremely friendly

and open. Surveyors introduced themselves and explained the purpose for the visit. Rather than risk alienating parents by implying negligence on their part if they were unaware of the law, surveyors pointed out that the survey was trying to determine whether or not the schools and the university needed to "do something to improve the communication of information to parents." No parent refused to answer survey questions. Most volunteered additional information. After stressing that survey items were not seeking opinion but actual knowledge, surveyors read the questions to parents and recorded their responses and comments. Surveyors were aware that the children of all but one of these parents spent only a small portion of their school day in a resource room. Surveyors were also aware that the parents were probably unfamiliar with the broad use of the word "handicapped" and most likely did not think of their children as handicapped. Thus, in order to avoid any defensive or negative feelings that might be engendered by use of the term and to avoid lengthy explanations and persuasions that their children must at least have "mild handicapping conditions", the surveyors made a last minute decision to substitute the phrase "a child in special education" for the term "handicapped student." The judiciousness of this modification was proven when, during the survey, it became clear that a few parents were not aware that their child was being served in a special education classroom.

SURVEY RESULTS

Table I shows parent responses to the survey questions.

TABLE I

	Yes	No
1. Do you know of any law that says public school systems must provide a free appropriate public education for a handicapped student even though they might not already have a program for students with his type of handicap?	25% (3)	75% (9)
2. Do you know of any law that says public schools must notify parents in writing before doing anything that will change the school program of a handicapped child?	42% (5)	58% (7)
3. Do you know of any law that says public schools must have parents' permission to test or evaluate a student for special education?	50% (6)	50% (6)
4. Do you know of any law that says more than one test must be used to evaluate a child for special education?	8% (1)	92% (11)
5. Do you know of any law that protects handicapped students from testing and evaluation that is racially or culturally discriminatory?	8% (1)	92% (11)
6. Do you know of any law that says the school must let a parent examine all of his child's school records if he/she wants to?	50% (6)	50% (6)
7. Do you know of any law that says parents may ask a school system to remove information from their child's records if they think the information is wrong or misleading?	33% (4)	67% (8)
8. Do you know of any law that says if the school system refuses to change or remove the information, it must let parents know that they can request a hearing to challenge the information?	25% (3)	75% (9)
9. Do you know of any law that says public schools must prepare an individual education plan for every handicapped student they serve?	25% (3)	75% (9)
10. If parents disagree with a school system about the best way to educate their handicapped child, do you know of any law which gives parents the right to ask for a hearing mediated by a person outside of that school system	25% (3)	75% (9)
11. Do you know of any law that says parents have a right to have legal counsel at such a hearing.	25% (3)	75% (9)

Table II reveals that five of the survey questions were answered affirmatively only three times out of twelve. Two of the eleven questions were answered affirmatively by only one parent out of twelve. One question received an affirmative answer four times out of twelve. One question was answered affirmatively five of twelve times. Only two questions received an affirmative answer from 50% of the parents surveyed. No question was answered affirmatively by more than 50% of the survey respondents.

TABLE II

QUESTION NUMBER	AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSES	NEGATIVE RESPONSES
3,6 (Permission for testing, Access to school records)	6	6
2 (Written notification)	5	7
7 (Removal of information)	4	8
1, 8, 9, 10, 11 (Hearing, IEP, Free, appropriate education)	3	9
4, 5 (Evaluation)	1	11

The questions which received the largest number of affirmative responses dealt with permission for testing, access to school records and written notification. Questions receiving the least number of affirmative responses were those dealing with hearings, the IEP, free appropriate education and evaluation. Of the total number of affirmative responses (38), fifteen of these, or 39% were accounted for by two parents. It is interesting to note that both of these parents are employed by the Anytown school district, one as a teacher, the other as an aide. Four of the twelve parents surveyed admitted that they did not know or were not sure whether their child was in a special education class. One parent emphatically stated that her daughter was no longer in any special education class. The daughter contradicted her mother and stated that she did attend a special education resource room for help in Math. Fortunately, in two of the four cases where a parent was uncertain whether the child was in special education, the child was also present and able to verify that he/she did in fact spend time in a special class.

Parent-School Contact

In addition to the questions related specifically to PL 94-142, parents were asked to provide information regarding their contact with the schools. Table III shows parent responses to questions designed to measure the extent of parent/school contact during the preceding two years.

TABLE III

1. In the last two years have you been invited to meet with educators from your child's school to talk about or plan your child's educational program?	YES 6	NO 7	CAN'T REMEMBER ____

Did you meet with these persons?

4 YES NO 2

WHY NOT?

"Working"

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2. In the last two years have you received any written communication from the school about your child's educational program? (Other than report cards)	YES 1	NO 11	CAN'T REMEMBER 1

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3. In the last two years have you received any informational material from the school related to the education of handicapped children or the rights of their parents?	YES ___	NO 10	CAN'T REMEMBER 3

Did you read it?

NA YES NO NA

4. In the last two years have you been invited to attend any meetings at your child's school such as PTA or PTO meeting, open houses, or informational meetings?

YES 9 | NO 4 | CAN'T REMEMBER _____

Did you attend?

4 YES 3 NO 2 CAN'T REMEMBER

Why Not?

"Transportation"

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5. Do you feel your child's placement and educational program are meeting his needs?

YES 9 | NO 3 | DON'T KNOW 1

15

Although six of the parents interviewed stated that they had been invited to a planning meeting with school personnel, an almost equal number stated that they had not been invited. Two of those parents who were invited to a planning meeting did not attend. The reason given was that they worked. Apparently no attempt was made by the school to arrange a meeting at a time when the parents were not working. The majority of parents reported that they had received no communication about their child's program other than report cards. Nor had the majority received any material related to the education of handicapped children. Most of the parents recalled being invited to PTA meetings but only four of nine parents attended PTA meetings. The reason most frequently given for nonattendance was lack of transportation. Most of the parents felt that their child's placement was meeting his/her needs. It was interesting to note, however, that of the four parents who did not feel their child's needs were being met, three of these parents had children with handicapping conditions more severe than others in the group. These conditions included hearing loss coupled with retardation, Down's Syndrome and epilepsy.

Information gained from further conversation with parents revealed that only six of the thirteen parents recalled having signed forms necessary to place their child in special education. Two emphatically stated that they had signed nothing. One

mother had the matter handled by a grown daughter in college and another insisted that the school had gotten her 17 year old daughter, a student in the system, to sign. The remaining parents were uncertain or unclear about whether or not they might have signed. This factor becomes understandable in light of the assertion by the parent of a seventh grader that she had given her signed permission for special education placement when the child was in first or second grade, but had signed nothing since then. According to a guide on evaluation and placement made availably by Arkansas Child Find and on file in Anytown school system, "The parent's signature (on a placement form) is required only at initial placement. Thereafter parents' signatures on the annual updated IEP is sufficient to meet consent requirements." Unfortunately, the Anytown school system does not secure these IEP signatures. Indeed almost all parents surveyed reported that they had never seen an IEP for their child. The one parent (a teacher in the system) who said she had seen an IEP for her daughter, also mentioned in this December interview that she had yet to see an updated IEP for the current school year.

It is obvious from these survey results that most of the black parents in Anytown have very limited information about PL 94-142. Nor, according to them, has the school system attempted to make them fully aware of their role and rights under 94-142. As one parent put it, "Don't nobody tell us nothing!"

Administrative Responses

In fairness to the Anytown school district, school administrators were given an opportunity to respond to questions regarding their attempts to make parents aware of Public Law 94-142.

Although "some effort" has been made by the school district to inform parents about 94-142, their rights of due process and accessibility to school records, this has been done for the most part via verbal explanations and handouts made available during referral and evaluation conferences, conferences which according to the school "parents are not good at attending", conferences to which, by the way, parents are invited only once it seems. School personnel admitted that they do not document their attempts to involve parents although 94-142 states that this should be done. This information is not checked by the state reviewer. Neverthless, school personnel generally felt that their efforts at providing information to parents of exceptional children had been moderately successful. They felt that parents were "very satisfied" with the school district's planning and programming for their children. To paraphrase one administrative respondent, the parents have confidence that the school is trying to help their children.

SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

It seems that in the case of Anytown's black parents with exceptional children "ignorance is bliss." Few know much about Public Law 94-142 and its entitlements, yet most expressed satis-

faction with the education their children were receiving. So all's well that ends well. Or is it?

Conversation with the parents surveyed indicated that most have so little knowledge of the role 94-142 has tried to secure for them and so little continuous contact with the schools that they are at an extreme disadvantage in attempting to judge the appropriateness of their children's educational programs. It is clear that the information they now receive is not only inadequate, but not understandable to them in its present form.

In addition, the hardships imposed by merely trying to support themselves and their children appears to have left some of these parents with little inclination or energy to assume a more aggressive role in seeking the information they need to effectively assist in educational planning. Both these conclusions are supported by a study by Gitterman wherein black parents themselves identified as barriers to their participation in school activities such things as (1) little energy or time (2) a sense of inadequacy and inability to handle verbal communications in relation to education professionals (3) a sense of being judged or (4) being made to feel ashamed of themselves, their positions or speech. It is apparent that if the objective of more active parental participation is to be met in Anytown, school personnel must take greater initiative in providing understandable information to parents and in supporting their full partnership in the educational process. This will not be easy given Anytown's previously mentioned

overall problems and given the long established pattern of interaction between the Anytown school district and parents. However, some recommendations for improving parental awarenesss and involvement did come to mind during the course of the Anytown survey.

Teachers and all educational personnel need to establish more effective oral and written communication with minority parents. They must be clear and understandable in oral and written communication without being pedantic or condescending. They must develop the ability to ascertain a parent's level understanding and make the appropriate modifications in communicating with the parent.

Marion suggests the following guidelines for establishing effective oral and written communications with black and minority parents.

- Know, if possible, the educational level of the parents before sending out written communication. This information will help determine the wording of the message.
- Use the titles Mr. and Mrs. in all written correspondence
- Be brief but clear in oral and written communications
- Use language that can be understood by the parent, but don't be condescending
- Be positive in your approach and begin with some of the child's positive attributes
- Ask parents to repeat parts of the discussion where clear understanding is essential. (Marion, 1977)

Second, educational and social service professionals must be better informed about the law. Study has shown that many teachers and others in education know little about 94-142 (Saunders and Sultana, 1981). Some school inservice sessions need to be devoted to fully acquainting all educational personnel with the tenets of PL 94-142. Local colleges and universities with teacher education programs can be of assistance in this endeavor. In addition to the information they can provide to school districts and their own teacher education students, they might offer workshops or training sessions for other professionals who often come into contact with parents. Persons such as public health nurses, social workers, welfare case workers etc. can be of great assistance in informing parents of the laws affecting the education of their handicapped children. Institutions of higher learning might also incoprorate into their teacher education programs additional field experiences whereby students would improve their parent conferencing skills and at the same time make parents aware of Public Law 94-142.

Third, the media and informational sources such as radio, television, newspapers and hotlines in small rural communities need to more systematically provide information about educational legislation.

Foruth, school districts themselves need to develop innovative incentives to encourage better parent attendance at PTA meetings, open houses and other school functions at which 94-142 could be explained. Techniques such as holding supper meetings, combining

student performances with informational meetings, providing baby-sitting services, arranging car pools or awarding special privileges to the class with the best or most improved parent participation have been effective in increasing parent attendance at some school meetings.

The church is the focal point of activities in many small or rural communities. Parents who may not have made it to last Tuesday night's PTA meeting can often be found already convened in church on Sunday morning and/or on Sunday evening. Church gatherings can then serve as another forum for communicating information about 94-142.

Finally, one major advantage of the very small community is that all the residents tend to know each other. Often the extended family is more prevalent than in larger cities. School systems should take advantage of these factors in disseminating information. Community persons could be identified who would function as "informational intermediaries" between the school and the home. These persons, such as extended family members, retired teachers, active church members, ministers and others could then be given some training regarding PL 94-142 and relay this information to parents in informal settings. The Anytown survey revealed that in many cases where parents were able to respond affirmatively to questions about PL 94-142, their source of knowledge had been just such persons: a grown daughter, a retired teacher, a school custodian. No doubt an established grapevine or informal

informational network already exists in most small rural communities. With some systematic identification and instruction of key individuals in that network, information about PL 94-142 can be disseminated to more parents than are presently being reached.

The stakes are high. Public Law 94-142 provides a vehicle whereby Black handicapped children can attain the educational benefits so long denied to them. But vehicles must have vigilant operators, who are knowledgable about the functioning of the vehicle and who are committed to keeping it on the course they wish to travel. No vehicle can take us further then we are willing to go.

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